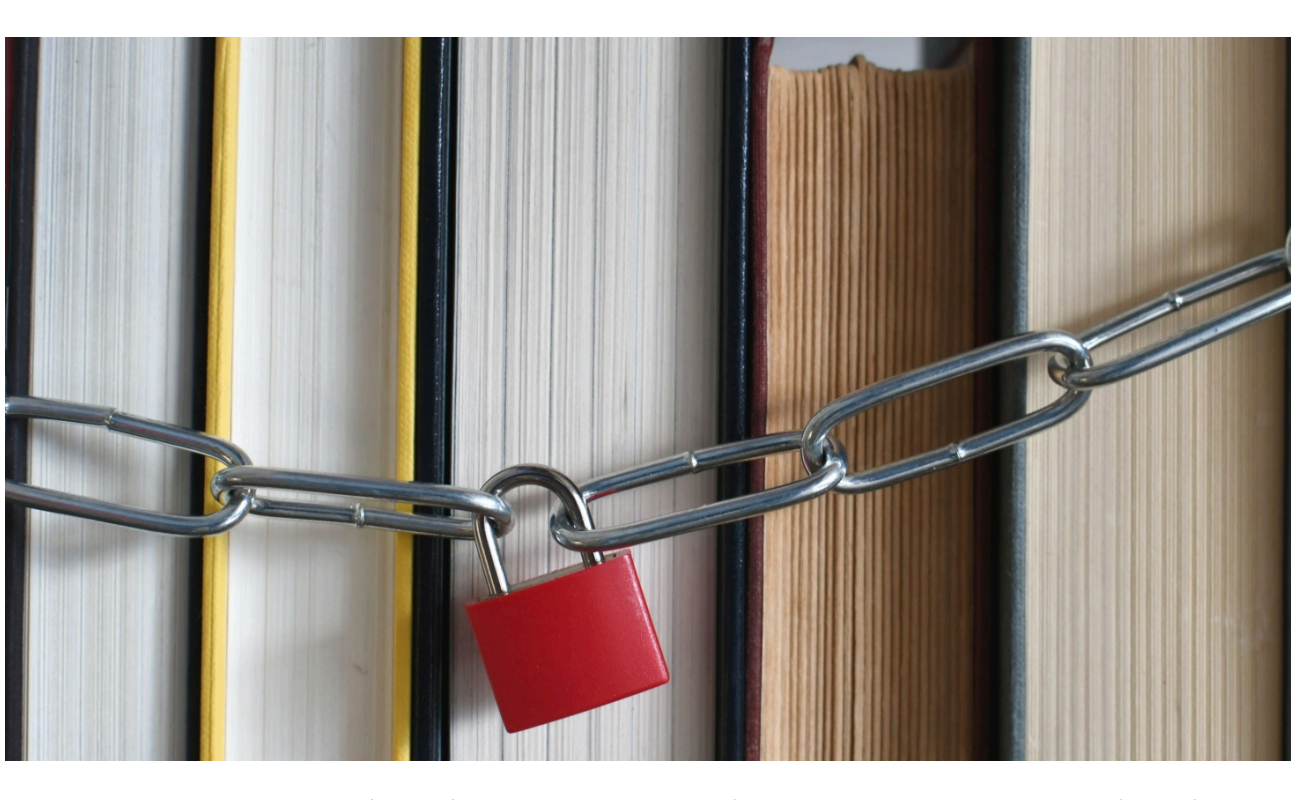
Banned Books List – 2025

February 17, 2025



On January 24, 2025, the White House issued a press release stating that the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) had "dismissed 11 complaints related to so-called 'book bans.'" What's this all about? Read on for the latest regarding book bans, and to learn which books make up the 2025 banned books list.

What is a Book Ban?

Book banning is as old as, well, books. Historically, book bans have taken the form of everything from burning books and criminalizing possession of certain titles to removing books from school libraries "pending review."

In the United States, book bans predate the nation's foundation. In 1637 in what is now Quincy, Massachusetts, Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan* was deemed heretical and banned by the Puritan government. Honestly, Morton sounds like a fun dude (among other activities deemed offensive to the Puritans, he erected a maypole and liked to dance with his Algonquin neighbors). He did, however, die in exile.

While comparing Puritans to crustaceans would be unlikely to cause controversy nowadays, book bans persist and should be taken seriously. In fact, data suggests that book challenges and bans are surging.

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

According to PEN America, a free expression group that tracks instances of book bans, a book ban is:

any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access toa book is restricted or diminished.

PEN America further identifies four (sometimes overlapping) subcategories of book bans:

- Books banned in libraries
- Books banned in schools
- Books banned in libraries *and* schools
- Books banned "pending investigation"

Why are Book Bans Considered a Civil Rights Issue?

Most contemporary book bans stem from opposition to content pertaining to race, gender, and/or sexuality. Federal judges have consistently ruled that book bans based on prejudice against a group violates the First Amendment rights of students (as well as teachers and librarians by creating a hostile environment. Moreover, since the First Amendment protects freedom of speech and of the press, as well as the *right to information*, those fighting book bans assert that the right to information extends to the right to read.

Under the Trump administration, the Department of Education (ED) has asserted that the removal of books from classroom or libraries does not violate civil rights laws. Accordingly, the ED Office for Civil Rights has dismissed six pending allegations of book banning and eliminated the "book ban coordinator" position created in 2023 by President Biden.

During the 2023-2024 school year, PEN America tracked more than 10,000 book bans targeting over 4,000 unique titles. Nearly half (45%) of the challenges occurred in Florida, where newly enacted legislation created a statutory process for book banning. Texas, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Utah also experience high rates of book banning. However, most book challenges are instigated by a small number of people and according to widely-circulated lists. For example, in 2023, challenges from just one parent lead to the temporary banning of 444 books in a school district in Wisconsin.

Some books are challenged persistently, whereas others are challenged at the height of popularity but don't necessarily make "banned books" lists year after year. In general, book bans reflect cultural tensions and social anxieties. Most recently, obscenity and "inappropriate sexual content" as some of the most-cited reasons for banning books about LGBTQ+ topics or characters.

Examples of Banned Books

Classics

Most of the books facing periodic challenges are considered "classics" which explore universal themes or hold particular meaning or significance for society. Many classic novels grace AP Lit Reading Lists and are hence used (and thus disputed) in schools. The below books show up consistently on lists of frequently banned books.

1) *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

Published in 1953, this American novel is set in a dystopian future in which books are banned (and burned by firemen). The protagonist, a fireman, becomes disillusioned with his work and questions the censorship of books. Ironically, given that the book is about book banning, *Fahrenheit 451* has faced multiple challenges over the decades.

Banned for "vulgarity," profanity, criticism of Christianity (and the burning of the Bible), and references to drugs.

***2)* *1984* by George Orwell**

Published in 1949, *1984* is another classic dystopian novel that imagines life under a totalitarian, surveillance state under the control of the Thought Police. The protagonist, Winston Smith, becomes a revolutionary.

Banned for sexual content and anti-government themes.

3) *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Considered a classic coming-of -age story, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is told from the perspective of a young girl, Scout Finch, growing up in Alabama during the Great Depression. The novel explores the themes of racism and prejudice, as the plot involves Scout's father, a lawyer, and his efforts to defend a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman.

Banned for racial themes and language (including the books' use of the n-word), depictions of rape, and profanity.

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

4) *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

Yet another dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic state that has overthrown the United States. The ruling class enslave fertile women ("handmaids") and force them to bear children.

Banned for sexual content, negative depictions of Christianity, and profanity.

Fun Fact: A fireproof copy of *The Handmaid's Tale*, called The Unburnable Book was auctioned off by Sotheby's in 2022 for $130,000. The proceeds were donated to PEN America.

5) *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank

Anne Frank was a German-born Jewish teenager who documented her years in hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Both the original edition, and a graphic novel adaptation published in 2018 have been challenged.

Banned for the author's reflections on her sexuality and body.

6) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

Another famous coming-of-age memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, details Maya Angelou's childhood experiences growing up as a Black girl in the segregated south and experiencing sexual violence and prejudice.

Banned for sexual content (including descriptions of rape and molestation), racial themes, and explicit language.

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

7) *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

This coming-of-age story is narrated by Holden Caulfield, a disillusioned teenager recently expelled from his prep school. As he wanders through New York City, he struggles with grief regarding his deceased brother and his own attempts to maintain his innocence as he grows up.

Banned for profanity and sexual references, as well as more general "negative content."

8) *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* was the Nobel Prize-winning author's debut novel. Set in 1940s Ohio, the novel tells the story of a young Black girl from an abusive home who equates beauty with whiteness and thus longs for blue eyes.

Banned for sexually content, profanity, and racial content.

Other frequently banned classics include:

9) *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker—*Banned for sexual content, descriptions of drug abuse, descriptions of torture, racial themes and language, and criticisms of Christianity.*

10) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain—*Banned for racial themes and language, profanity, and, in 1885, the characters' "low grade of morality."*

11) *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller–*Banned for racial content and language, profanity, and anti-government themes.*

12) *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck—*Banned for racial slurs, profanity, and vulgarity.*

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

13) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston–*Banned for sexual content, violence (including domestic abuse), racial themes, and the main character's rejection of traditional gender roles.*

14) *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald—*Banned for depictions of infidelity, promiscuity, and homosexuality.*

15) *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley—*Banned for sexual content, drug use, and derogatory language.*

Contemporary Literature

Some of these books may well belong (or eventually end up on) lists of Classics, but here are some modern books facing frequent challenges:

16) *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini

Published in 2003, this novel tells the story of two boys growing up in 1970s Afghanistan. Their friendship and diverging paths are explored against the backdrop of the rise of the Taliban regime.

Banned for sexual content, racial themes, LGBTQ themes, references to abortion, and criticisms of Christianity.

17) *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls

In Jeanette Walls' memoir about her unconventional childhood, she describes growing up in poverty as a member of a dysfunctional family as they move around the American West.

Banned for explicit language, depictions of violence, and references to sexual abuse and alcoholism.

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

18) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie

This book tells the story of Native American teenager living on the Spokane Indian Reservation who decides to leave his reservation school to attend an all-white high school.

Banned for profanity, sexual content, and depictions of violence.

19) *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult

Jodi Picoult's novel topped many "most banned" lists from 2023-2024. The book follows the events leading up to and following a shooting at a high school in New Hampshire.

Banned for depictions of violence and reference to date rape.

Book Series, Young Adult Novels, and Graphic Novels

Young adult literature, particularly book series and graphic novels, tends to be heavily impacted by book bans. Differing opinions regarding what constitutes "inappropriate" content for tweens and teens, as well as the degree to which parents should be able to determine which books are or are not available in school settings, drive many of the challenges.

20) *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins

This popular dystopian series follows teenagers engaging in televised fights to the death as collective punishment for a past rebellion.

Banned for violence, anti-government themes, and social critiques.

21) The *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer

These fantasy romance novels explore the relationship between a human teenager and a vampire.

Banned for sexual content, age inappropriateness, and relationship abuse.

22) *A Court of Thorn and Roses* series by Sarah J. Maas

The colloquially named "ACOTAR" series about faeries, while not technically considered YA literature, is popular with fantasy and romance (or "romantasy") readers of all ages. Most of the books in the series faced many challenges during the 2023-2024 school year, as seen below.

Banned for sexual content, depictions of violence, and relationship abuse.

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

23) *The Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling

Harry Potter is a series of coming-of-age fantasy novels following Harry Potter and his friends at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Concerns about the books' depictions of magic and the occult arose even before the series was completed, and challenges to the books gained widespread attention during the early 2000s.

Banned for "satanism and anti-family themes" as well as depictions of magic. Some challengers also advanced the idea that the book could "conjure evil spirits."

24) *Crank* series by Ellen Hopkins

YA author Ellen Hopkins is no stranger to book challenges, as many of her novels top recent lists. In particular, the Crank series, following teenage protagonist Kristina, is a bestselling trilogy about drug addiction.

Banned for depictions of drug use, sexual content, and profanity.

25) *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson

Described by the author as a "memoir-manifesto," this essay collection details their experiences growing up as a Black, queer teenager in New Jersey.

Banned for LGBTQIA+ content, sexually explicit content, and profanity.

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

26) *Looking for Alaska* by John Green

Written by popular YA content-creator John Green, *Looking For Alaska* follows a new student at a boarding school as he becomes infatuated by a fellow student and grapples with the consequences of a tragic event.

Banned for profanity, sexually explicit material, and LGBTQIA+ material.

27) *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe

This graphic memoir chronicles the author's exploration of their gender identity, and experiences growing up non-binary.

Banned for sexually explicit material and LGBTQIA+ content.

28) *Maus* by Art Spiegelman

This Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel follows the author's parents' experience as Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. While not necessarily intended for a YA audience, the graphic novel format makes the book particularly accessible for YA readers.

Banned for profanity and a nude drawing.

Other frequently banned YA books include:

29) *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky—*Banned for sexual content, drug and alcohol use, and LGBTQIA+ content.*

30) *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher—*Banned for depictions of suicide, sexual content, drug and alcohol use, and "negative depictions of helping professionals."*

31) *The Giver* by Lois Lowry—Banned for depictions of violence (including infanticide and euthanasia), sexual content, and themes of "social control."

32) The *His Dark Materials* series by Philip Pullman—*Banned for critiques of religion and/or promotion of atheism.*

Children's Books

Finally, children's books (including board books) are not immune to book bans. Examples of banned children's books include:

33) *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

This 1963 picture book written and illustrated by Maurice Sendak tells the story of the adventurous and tender Max, who finds himself on a fantastical island "where the wild things are."

Banned for depictions of witchcraft and supernatural elements, as well as "dark" themes.

34) *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell

This 2005 children's illustrated book is based on the true story of two male penguins who formed a bond at the Central Park Zoo in New York City. After zookeepers witnessed the couple attaching to "hatch" a rock, they gave them an abandoned egg. The pair hatched the egg and raised the chick, Tango, as their own.

Banned in Florida schools due to House Bill 1557, known as the "Don't Say Gay" law, which prohibits sexual instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in the classroom. Even beyond Florida, the book topped PEN America's list of "Most Banned Picture Books" in the 2023-2024 school year.

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

35) *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?* By Bill Martin

This classic book about, well, what a brown bear sees was briefly banned by the Texas State Board of Education in 2010 because they confused its author with that of another book entitled *Ethical Marxism: The Categorical Imperative of Liberation*, which itself was banned for its "very strong critiques of capitalism and the American system." While a humorous mix-up, the incident also revealed that those challenging books have often not read the books they seek to ban.

Most Banned Books 2023-2024

As noted, several different organizations track book bans by year, including the American Library Association and PEN America. While different organizations use different tracking metrics, there tends to be general consistency across annual "most banned lists."

PEN America's list of "most banned books" during the 2023-2024 school year reflect a mix of the above lists:

36) *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult (98 bans)

37) *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (97 bans)

38) *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (85 bans)

39) *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (85 bans)

40) *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (76 bans)

41) *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins (76 bans)

42) *Identical* by Ellen Hopkins (74 bans)

43) *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (73 bans)

44) *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (67 bans)

45) *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen (66 bans)

Banned Books List 2025 (Continued)

46) *Tricks* by Ellen Hopkins (66 bans)

Other books challenged in 50 or more school districts during the 2023-2024 school year include:

47) *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas

48) *Empire of Storms* by Sarah J. Maas

49) *A Court of Mist and Fury* by Sarah J. Maas

50) *A Court of Wings and Ruin* by Sarah J. Maas

51) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie

52) *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

53) *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

54) *A Court of Frost and Starlight* by Sarah J. Maas

Teacher Tools

Jordan Conley

Jordan received her BA from the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, WA, where she majored in Religious Studies and Classics. Following her undergraduate work, she spent several years teaching elementary school--first in northern Thailand as a fellow with Princeton in Asia, then in Bozeman, Montana. Jordan went on to receive a Master's in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, and is currently working toward completing her PhD at Boston University, focusing on religions of the Ancient Mediterranean.

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